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ABSTRACT

When do we accept another's opinion regarding the characteristics or beliefs of a target person, and when do we reject that opinion? Different sorts of information may need to be assimilated by the perceiver. When does one type of information take priority over the other? A central focus of attribution research has been on the informational value of a target's behavior. A proposition which has been repeatedly verified is that behavior, which is perceived to be freely chosen by the target, has greater informational value for the perceiver regarding the target's attitude than does behavior performed under constraint. To examine these hypotheses, the 72 subjects were presented with an attributional dilemma in the form of a 10-item response set, and a written essay. Perceivers were asked to integrate the two contradictory pieces of information when making an attribution, each piece varying in it's implicational relationship to the attitude to be inferred. Two of the independent variables were the directionality and ambiguity of the target person's response set. The third variable was the constraint level pertaining to the target person's essay. Results suggest that attributions are, to a degree, correspondent with behavior even when that behavior occurs under constraint. (Author/BMW)

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SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES

by

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When do we accept another's opinion regarding the characteristics or beliefs of a target person, and when do we reject that opinion? While our impressions of others are often based upon our direct observation of their behavior, we also frequently receive information from others, e.g., letters of recommendation or a casual reflection about a common associate. Most common, perhaps, is the perceiver who obtains some information directly, and other information from second-hand sources. Quite different sorts of information may have to be reconciled or assimilated if the perceiver has to form an opinion or render a judgment about the target. When does one type of information take priority over the other? This general problem was the focus of the present research.

A central focus of attribution research has been on the diagnosticity or informational value of a target's behavior (e.g., Jones & McGillis, 1976). A proposition which has been repeatedly verified is that behavior which is perceived to be freely chosen by the target has greater informational value for the perceiver regarding the target's personality or attitude than does behavior performed under constraint (e.g., Jones & Harris, 1967; Miller, 1976). Previous research on the attribution of attitudes has given the perceiver direct access to the target's behavior. However, the effects of target constraint level on the extremity of attitude attribution should, in principle, be generalizable to second-hand or overheard information.

Consider, for example, that a third party notes that a mutual friend behaved in a rather unusual manner. If there is no reason to doubt his word, and if no external cause can be found for that behavior, we may be influenced by the remarks of the third party and change our impression of our friend. If, however, there was a plausible external justification for his behavior, of which the third party was unaware, then we can discount his observation and maintain our previously held impression. This scenario was incorporated into the

present study. The information from an observer (third party) was itself in the form of an attributional judgment. The perceiver (i.e., the subject) was told that the observer had made a judgment on the basis of the target's behavior which, depending upon the experimental condition, either was or was not externally constrained. It was specified that the observer had not been aware of this contingency. It was expected that the perceiver would be sensitive to the informational value of the observer's judgment and would consider its diagnosticity when making his own judgment about the target. The influence of the observer's judgment upon the perceiver was predicted to be greater when that judgment was, in attributional terms, more informative.

A second issue was the nature of the information received from the target himself, specifically a set of attitude responses. The concept of informational value was again employed by varying the implicational relationship between the information given to the perceiver and the target's attitude which was to be inferred, specifically his attitude toward capital punishment. In one condition, the information was unambiguously related to the dependent variable; in another condition, it was relatively ambiguous. Subjects exposed to the unambiguous information should make more extreme or polorized attitude inferences than subjects exposed to the ambiguous target information. This prediction follows from the experiment of Jones, Worchel, Goethals, and Grumet (1971), who observed weak or equivocal behavior to produce relatively moderate attributions of attitude. There is also reason to suggest that perceivers receiving ambiguous information would be relatively more dependent upon the observer's judgment than perceivers receiving unambiguous information, and thus more sensitive to the informational value of the observer's judgment. This line of reasoning relates conceptually to the extensive literature documenting the relationship between uncertainty (i.e., ambiguity) and social influence or comparison (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Nord, 1969; Wheeler, 1970).

In the present study, subjects were presented with an attributional dilemma in that there was a discrepancy or contradiction between the information they received from the target and the information they received from the observer about the target. If the information from the target suggested that he was in favor of capital punishment, the evidence from the observer was to the effect that the target was against it; the reverse condition was also examined. The experiment thus involved the combination of two sources of information, each at two levels of informational value, producing four experimental conditions. These conditions placed the perceiver in varying positions regarding the resolution of the informational conflict. Two control conditions were added, consisting of information from the target (ambiguous or unambiguous) without the observer's judgment.

Method

Overview

Subjects were told that the experiment was concerned with the manner in which impressions are formed on the basis of limited information. After engaging in several preliminary tasks to make more plausible and understandable the subsequent experimental materials, subjects were provided with two basic types of information; a set of attitude items (allegedly) filled out by the target person, and a judgment of that target person's attitude made by another subject who had (allegedly) read an essay that the target person had written on capital punishment. The subject's task was to consider both types of information and then make his/her own attribution regarding the target's attitude on the issue.

Construction of Attitude Response Sets

A given response set included 10 items. Each of the 10 items consisted of a statement, e.g., "I believe in the American way of life", and, immediately below, an 11-point scale (-5 = strongly disagree, +5 = strongly agree). A series

of 24 response sets was constructed, each with the same 10 items, but with varying patterns of agreement or disagreement in terms of the specific scale values which were circled. Fifty subjects read each of the 24 sets and estimated the (hypothetical) respondent's attitude toward capital punishment (0 = strong anti, 10 = strong pro); they also expressed confidence ratings for these estimates (0-10). Four sets were selected for the experiment itself. Two sets implied that the respondent was pro capital punishment and two implied a negative attitude. Within each direction, one set was extreme and unambiguous regarding its implication to capital punishment, whereas the other was less extreme or more equivocal. Implication and confidence means for the four sets were: Unambiguous pro: $\bar{X}_{Impl} = 8.96$, $\bar{X}_{Conf} = 8.46$; Ambiguous pro: $\bar{X}_{Impl} = 7.02$, $\bar{X}_{Conf} = 7.24$; Unambiguous anti: $\bar{X}_{Impl} = 3.52$, $\bar{X}_{Conf} = 7.76$; Ambiguous anti: $\bar{X}_{Impl} = 5.40$, $\bar{X}_{Conf} = 6.66$.

Subjects

Subjects were 72 male and female students from introductory psychology. They were run in group sessions, N = 6 to 10, the experimental conditions distributed randomly within each session.

Independent Variable Manipulations

Target response sets. Each subject was asked to infer an attitude toward capital punishment for four target persons. They were given the attitude response sets, previously described, which consisted of the combinations of implicational direction and degree of ambiguity. The attitude response sets were described as having been produced by subjects (i.e., the target persons) in an earlier phase of the research. The order of presentation of these sets was counterbalanced through the use of a balanced Latin square design (Wagenaar, 1969).

Observer judgments. The target persons were also described as having

written, earlier in the project, an essay on capital punishment, to which an observer had made an attribution of attitude. This observer attribution constituted the third independent variable. One group of subjects was given the observer attributions and was informed that the target persons had freely chosen which essay position to defend (Choice). Subjects in a second group were also given the observer judgments, but were informed that the essay direction had been assigned to the target persons, as if they had been in a debate (Assign). A third group received no observer attribution (Control), but was provided only with the targets' response sets as their source of information. For subjects receiving observer judgments, this information was presented on a separate sheet, in the form of a circled response on a -5 (strongly opposed) to +5 (strongly in favor) scale pertaining to the observer's attribution of the target's attitude toward capital punishment.

The perceiver's dilemma. For subjects receiving both attitude response sets and observer judgments, there was always a discrepancy between the two sources of information. When the response set implied a pro capital punishment attitude, the observer judgment indicated a -3; when the response set implied an anti attitude, the observer's judgment was +3. Information pertaining to the observer's attribution always was given first and the response sets second in the information booklets.

Dependent Variable Measures

Subjects responded to the item, "In general, what do you think is the target person's deepest or most personal belief toward capital punishment?" (0 = strongly against, 10 = strongly in favor). They were also asked for confidence ratings regarding their estimate (0 = not at all confident, 10 = extremely confident).

Secondary Measures and Checks

After the attribution and confidence measures were collected from each

subject for each of the four target persons, subjects were again given the four response sets and were asked how important the response set was when making their attribution, how important it would be to know a third party's judgment when making their attribution, how clear or obvious the attitude responses were in helping to decide the target person's attitude toward capital punishment, and the degree to which the response set items were sufficient in terms of enabling the subject to predict the target's attitude. All measures were on 0-10 point scales. As a check on the constraint variable, subjects were asked to rate how much freedom the target persons had when writing their essays (which had provided the basis for the observer attribution; 0 = no freedom or choice, 10 = complete freedom and choice).

Experimental Design

The design was a 2 X 2 X 3 factorial. Two of the independent variables consisted of the directionality (pro or anti) and ambiguity (unambiguous or ambiguous) of the target person's response set. These constituted repeated factors as each subject judged the four target persons resulting from the crossing of these variables. The third variable was the constraint level pertaining to the target person's essay, which the observer had judged (choice, assign, or no-observer control). Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three levels of this factor.

Results

Independent Variable Checks

The constraint on target person manipulation, conveyed in the observer judgment, was effective as subjects in the choice condition rated the target's freedom higher than subjects in the assign condition ($\bar{X}_{Choice} = 5.13$, $\bar{X}_{Assign} = 3.17$, $F(1,44) = 7.62$, $p < .01$). The ambiguity of the target information was

effectively manipulated as indicated by subjects rating the unambiguous response sets as more clear ($\bar{X}_{Unamb}$ = 6.43, $\bar{X}_{Amb}$ = 4.63, F(1, 69) = 44.06, p < .01), more important when inferring an attitude toward capital punishment ($\bar{X}_{Unamb}$ = 7.47, $\bar{X}_{Amb}$ = 6.31, F(1,69) = 32.40, p < .01), and more self-explanatory of the target's attitude ($\bar{X}_{Unamb}$ = 4.73, $\bar{X}_{Amb}$ = 3.04, F(1,69) = 34.04, p < .01).

Attributions of Attitude Toward Capital Punishment

Cell means are shown in Figure 1. The test of the predicted effect of response set ambiguity is the ambiguity X implicational direction interaction (F(1,69) = 43.38, p < .01). As expected, the ambiguous response sets produced attitude attributions which were less extreme for both the pro and anti capital punishment response sets. Separate analyses for the pro and anti implication conditions indicated significant main effects for ambiguity (Pro: $\bar{X}_{Unamb}$ = 7.21, $\bar{X}_{Amb}$ = 5.74, F(1,69) = 40.75, p < .01; Anti: $\bar{X}_{Unamb}$ = 3.51, $\bar{X}_{Amb}$ = 4.93, F(1,69) = 17.96, p < .01).

The predicted effect of target choice, as tested by the target choice X implicational direction interaction, was also obtained (F(2,69) = 5.75, p < .01). Separate analyses for the pro and anti implication conditions show that the influence of the observer's judgment was greater when that judgment was of greater informational value (Anti: $\bar{X}_{Choice}$ = 5.02, $\bar{X}_{Assign}$ = 4.48, $\bar{X}_{Control}$ = 3.17, F(2,69) = 5.41, p < .01; Pro: $\bar{X}_{Choice}$ = 5.96, $\bar{X}_{Assign}$ = 6.35, $\bar{X}_{Control}$ = 7.10, F(2,69) = 2.22, p < .12). The control means, representing the effects of the response sets alone, were more extreme than either the assign or choice conditions.

The triple interaction of the independent variables was not significant (F(2,69) = .48), thus providing no support for the conclusion that subjects receiving ambiguous target information would be more sensitive to the informational value of the observer's judgment. This would have appeared in Figure 1 with the ambiguous condition means showing greater slope than the unambiguous means.

Discussion

Attributional judgments in the present experiment constituted one major source of the stimulus information (i.e., the observer's judgment) as well as the central dependent measure. The findings support the central thesis of correspondent inference theory (Jones & McGillis, 1976), as well as the information integration perspective (e.g., Miller, 1976), specifically that behavior produced by an actor under constraint is perceived to be less diagnostic of the actor's personal disposition or attitude, or is given less weight in the perceiver's judgment, than is behavior produced under relative freedom or choice. Although previous research presented the target's behavior directly to perceivers, the format of the present study documents the attenuating influence of constraint in the context of second-hand or third-party information. The results also extend a line of research showing that attributions are, to a degree, correspondent with behavior even when that behavior occurs under constraint (e.g., Snyder & Jones, 1974). Perceivers in this study were influenced by the observer's judgment even when it was relatively low in informational value.

Not only the quality but also the quantity of information should influence the value attached to it. In the present experiment, perceivers were given 10 attitude items (allegedly) from the target, but only one observer judgment. Thus, even in the condition of strongest observer influence, the data suggest that the directionality of the response set was, in effect, neutralized, but not that the attributions were close to the absolute value of the observer's judgment. The use of different amounts of information, for example, 5 attitude items and 2 observer judgments, should have predictable outcomes. The consensus of observers' judgments, from the perspective of attribution theory, would be a particularly important factor in determining the influence of that source of information.

A considerable amount of the information we receive about people (and about ourselves) derives from the opinions of others, hence it is important to

understand how perceivers process that information. Much of our behavior relates to the attributional information we receive, and it is thus important to recognize when we are appropriately sensitive, or not, to the diagnostic or informational value of the judgments of other perceivers. This question would seem to have both theoretical and practical importance. Academics will recognize the recommendation letter as a case in point. From an attributional framework, such information is fraught with ambiguity. The observer is usually selected by the target; the purpose of the letter is to influence the perceiver; the target is under situational pressure (i.e., to get a job). Yet, such information is often invested with extraordinary significance and diagnosticity. Siskind (1965) has humorously expressed his exasperation after encountering dozens of "angelic" target persons via the eyes of their letter writers. On occasion, the perceiver and the target of an observer's judgment are one and the same. Jones and Wortman (1973) have described the complexities involved in the ingratiation process, where the targets of the ingratiator are often pleased or perplexed when receiving flattering information from observers whose judgmental motives are suspect.

Providing the perceiver with additional information about the observer would be a relevant manipulation. Goethals (1976), for example, has shown that the degree of similarity between the perceiver and another person (observer) affects the perceiver's response to information supplied by that person about a target. The present findings would suggest that perceivers are capable of reacting logically and differentially to observer opinion of varying informational value. It should be noted, however, that the format of this experiment was one of information processing. The subject's role was to study materials and make judgments. Extending the issues of this research to a more direct or "live" analog of social influence or interpersonal behavior would be an appropriate test of the generality of these results.

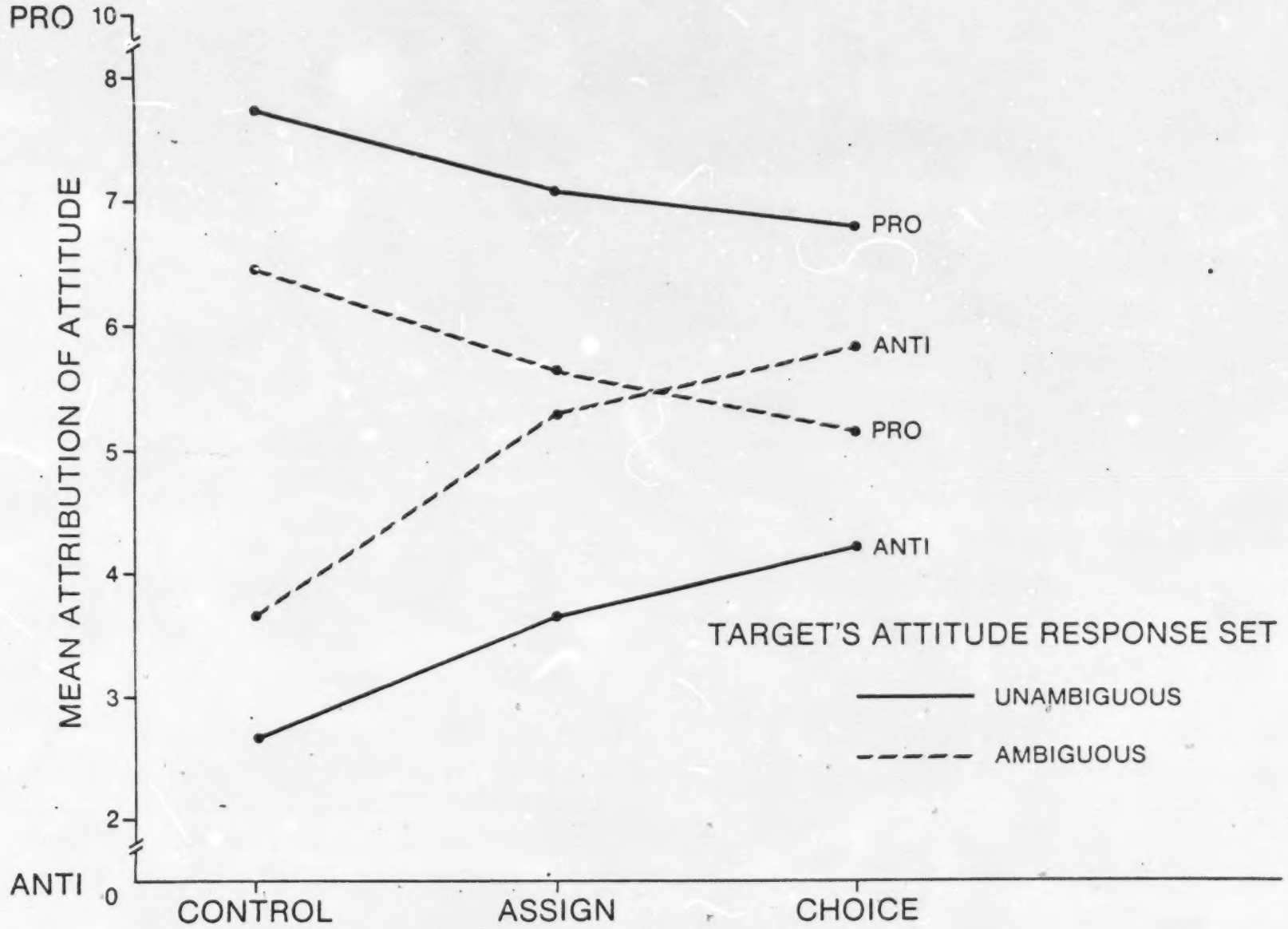

Figure 1. Attribution of attitude as a function of directionality and implicational value of attitude responses and the target's essay condition (Observer's judgment of attitude is always in the direction opposite to that implied by the response set).

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